



Jarena Lee

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That day was the first when my heart had believed, and my tongue had made confession unto salvation - the first words uttered, a part of that song, which shall fill eternity with its sound, was glory to God. For a few moments I had power to exhort sinners, and to tell of the wonders and of the goodness of Him who had clothed me with His salvation. During this the minister was silent, until my soul felt its duty had been performed, when he declared another witness of the power of Christ, to forgive sins on earth, was manifest in my conversion.

— Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee

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Quick Facts

- * 1783-?
- * African-American author and preacher
- * One of the first “licensed” female preachers in the African Methodist Episcopal Church

Biography

Jarena Lee’s sole contribution to literary history is her spiritual autobiography, first published as *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* in 1836 and later revised and expanded as *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee* in 1849. It is well documented that Lee was born to free but poor parents on February 11, 1783. Because of the economic circumstances of her family, Lee was sent off to work as a live-in servant when she was just seven. She did not see her family again for fourteen years.

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Jarena Lee

Biography continued

By that time, she had embraced Christianity, experiencing conversion after hearing a sermon by Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. Immediately following her conversion, Lee was plagued by feelings of unworthiness. Lee fought these feelings through her faith and was rewarded by a sanctification process which Lee describes in her autobiography as having come upon her instantaneously: “As if lightening had darted through me, I sprang to my feet, and cried, ‘The Lord has sanctified my soul!’” (132-133) With this sanctification process came a calling to preach the gospel.

Lee details in her writings her arguments for a woman’s right to preach. These arguments are very much an early form of feminist theology. Her arguments were indeed eventually heeded by Richard Allen, and she was granted permission first to preach on the itinerary circuit and then to hold prayer meetings in her home, both huge concessions to be given a nineteenth century woman of any race.

Before taking up her call to preach, however, Jarena Lee in 1811 married Joseph Lee, pastor of a small town church. A few years later, Lee found herself widowed and the single mother of two small children. Though suffering through the trials of caring for her children and of fending off her own illnesses, Jarena Lee answered her call to preach in earnest now that she was more free to travel.

Lee outlines in her autobiography her spiritual journey and trials. She gives very little space to revelations about her family or personal life. She does leave the reader with an impression of herself as an extremely strong woman, one who passes into dangerous slaveholding towns to preach the gospel, and one who stands up to the church leaders of her day, asserting her right to preach as a God-given gift that must--not should--be used. Some scholars consider her the first “licensed” woman preacher in the A.M.E. church.

There is no known record of Jarena Lee’s death, or of the activities of her later years of life, for that matter. All information about her ends with the 1849 version of her spiritual autobiography. “For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God . . . Did not Mary first preach the risen Savior . . . ? . . . Then did not Mary, a woman, preach the gospel?” From Jarena Lee’s autobiography as reprinted in *Sisters in the Spirit* (36).



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Selected Bibliography

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